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ABSTRACT

Metalinguistic cognition is the ability to think about language, to comment on it, to produce it, to comprehend it, and to manipulate language as an object with many identifiable and functional parts. It appears that metalinguistic skill development is related to cognitive development and is dependent on metalinguistic awareness which runs parallel to cognitive growth. Research studies provide findings that show metalinguistic awareness is interrelated to reading ability, academic achievement, and to environmental stimulation and play before school. Early metalinguistic awareness is important to literacy in reading and in language arts during the elementary school years. Thus, literacy may be thought of as the essence of metalinguistic awareness which begins when two-year-old children begin to monitor their own speech. (Four tables of data are included, and 20 references are attached.) (MM)

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THE LITERACY OF METALINGUISTIC AWARENESS

A paper presented to the faculty of St. Dominic School in Baltimore, Md., Spring 1989.

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THE LITERACY OF METALINGUISTIC AWARENESS

How aware does a child need to be of an existing, structured, manipulative language in order to be ready to learn to read? What linguistic recognition and abilities does a child use when processing language...oral or visual?

The question usually posited by researchers of reading is, "At what age is a child ready to learn to read?" This article is intended to redirect reading instructors' attention to the aspects of pre-lingual and lingual development of young children to school-aged children that underlie the use of linguistic structure and features to communicate through language, spoken or in print. It is this development that undergirds language literacy.

The metalinguistic development of the school-aged child seems nebulous and difficult to apply to reading instruction until it is dichotomized and analyzed. An attempt will be made to structure metalinguistic awareness into its order of development and to fit this order into cognitive development.

Metalinguistic cognition is the ability to think about language, to comment on it, to produce it, to comprehend it, and to manipulate language as an object with many identifiable and functional parts. The ability of a child to deliberately manipulate language is preceded by internal awarness of different aspects of verbal expression while being steeped in sounds and utterances from birth. The author has ordered internal awareness and parallel cognitive development in Table 1.

Table 1

Order of Development of Metalinguistic Awareness to Cognitive Developmental Stages

Metalinguistic Awareness	Cognitive Development
PHONOLOGICAL AWARENESS	SENSORIMOTOR (0-2 years)
SYNTACTIC AWARENESS	PRE-OPERATIONAL (2-7 years)
SEMANTIC AWARENESS	CONCRETE OPERATIONAL (7-11 years)

The first metalinguistic level is phonological in reception, perception, and execution and occurs during Piaget's sensorimotor stage (0 - 2 years). Unless the child has a hearing deficit, sounds in the environment are experienced from birth. Speech utterances are heard, perceived, and held until the physiological development to produce those sounds catches up to the receptive development. Is this not an inner-literacy? During infancy, babies babble and play with sounds. These utterances and trials exhibit the metalinguistic awareness of the phonological base, or sound system, of a communicative, human language.

The second level of metalinguistic awareness is one of syntactic awareness which begins during the cognitive stage known as the pre-operational state (2 - 7 years). The young child's expressive language syntactically occurs around two

years with one or two word utterances which hold meaning, to the child, of much more than he is cognitively equipped to verbalize. However, around age five, the emergence of grammar awareness is noted, though this linguistic competence to apply rules occurs before he knows what rules are. During this budding application the child is not yet aware of a deliberate analysis and the application is still aural/oral in nature

The final level of metalinguistic development is semantic awareness which begins around age seven and proceeds through the concrete operational cognitive stage (7 - 11). It is the last level which is of great concern to the elementary teacher since what happens here is directly related to his/her efforts. This semantic awareness can only emerge after the child has acquired linguistic form.

Semantic awareness can be divided into two levels of development which hierachically emerge. This dichotomy should be of interest to teacher. The levels are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Semantic Awareness

PRIVILEGE OF OCCURRENCE	Distinguish words as symbols Identify words separately from the speech stream
SYNTAGMATIC/PARADIGMATIC	Aware of oral word order relationship to visual structure

The step of being aware of each word's privilege of occurence leads to the development of true semantic awareness with full meaning. Until a child realizes that each word, independently, separately, and out of the speech stream, stands for some thing, little understanding is to be expected. Very young children will "speak" in sophisticated terms thus appearing to know the true meaning. It is easy to misjudge a child's understanding of a concept because of this ability to correctly apply words that are way beyoud his cognitive level.

A shift from oral speech order to visual structure, paradigmatic, occurs during transition between the pre-operational and concrete operational stages of cognitive development. This syntagmatic/paradigmatic shift is shown in Table 3.

Table 3

Syntagmatic/Paradigmatic Shift

SYNTAGMATIC AWARENESS	PARADIGMATIC AWARENESS
...Oral word placement	...Visual structure
...Different word from relationship	...Pair words with same linguistic attributes

The syntagmatic aspect begins with the oral order of words which organize different word forms or different parts of speech in relation to each other; such as, noun/verb form sentences. The paradigmatic aspect is the visual structure of paired linguistic semantic attributes. Para means along side; digma means to show or to exhibit. This consists of a classification of word types into lists of sample words that are alike in some attribute. A deliberate identification is carried out, such as a list of inflectional endings, nouns, or adjectives that are being studied.

This linguistic process continues to develop through the school years as semantic features broaden. Semantic features are the perceptual or functional aspects of meaning that characterizes a word; such as, animate/inanimate and male/female (Owens, 1984).

Hierarchical metalinguistic skills have been identified by Clark (1978). These skills are shown in Table 4. Cognitive levels during which each skill is emerging, and grade levels where applicable, have been added.

Table 4

Metalinguistic Skills

Skills and Awareness	Age, Stage, Grade
1. Ability to monitor one's on-going speech	
Prerequisite to:	1½ - 2 years
...Spontaneous repair	Sensorimotor
...Practice sounds, words, and sentences	
...Adjust speech to listeners	
2. Ability to check results of one's utterance	
...Check for listener understanding	
...Comment explicitly on own utterances and those of others	
...Correct others	
3. Ability to test for reality	3 - 4 years
...Decide whether a word or sentence "works" to further understanding	Pre-Operational Preschool
...Decide appropriateness of the topic	
4. Deliberately attempt to learn language	
...Practice new sounds, words, and sentences	
...Practice speech styles of different roles	

5. Predict the consequences of using particular forms (inflections, words, phrases, or sentences)

...Apply appropriate inflections to "new" words — 5 - 7 years

...Judge utterances as appropriate for a specific listener or setting — Pre-Operational K - 2-0 grade

...Correct word order and wording in sentences

6. Reflect on the product of an utterance (structure independent of use)

...Identify specific linguistic units (sounds, syllables, words, or sentences) — 8 - 12 years

...Provide definitions of words — Concrete Operational 3.0 - 7.0 grade

...Construct puns, riddles, or other forms of humor

...Explain why some sentences are possible and how to interpret them

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(Source: Owens, 1984, p. 303)

Language and Reading Research

According to Piaget (1959), the child is aware of the sentence before being aware of individual words. Vygotsky (1962) states that higher cognitive and linguistic development is needed to understand the concept of "the word," because written language is abstract. These assumptions of Piaget and Vygotsky led to much research about language and reading (Owens, 1984).

Through speech play, young children manipulate language and learn rules of their linguistic system . This metalinguistic awareness accesses an internal rule system of language and enables them to distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable language usage (Pellegrini, 1981). Even three- and four-year-old children are able to make metalinguistic judgements (School and Ryan, 1982; Smith, 1982).

The transfer from ease of speech competence and metalinguistic awareness in personal use of language, is slow. It takes time and experience with word manipulation to understand the concept of "a word." Terms such as word, letter, number, name, and sound, used in reading instruction have abstract meanings to a child (Reid, 1966; Downing, 1974).

In an investigation of word boundary discrimination, Meltzer and Herse (1969) discovered that first graders, early in the school year, rely purely on visual stimuli and exhibit cognitive confusion. It appears that word

boundary discrimination is sequential and developmental because the student must analyze visual structure of language. This requires the ability to decenter and to conserve and reverse mental operations.

Other research substantiates the developmental aspect of language literacy. Acquisition of word boundary discrimination between speech and print is gradual (Holden and Mc Ginitie, 1972). First graders, after four months of reading instruction are beginning to understand how to deal with words and their meanings...separately. Evans (1975) concluded that this confirms that learning to read may enable children to attend to structure rather than to simply process meaning units in chunks.

There is a strong relationship between awareness of word order in sentences and reading readiness and achievement for children in kindergarten through third grade. This type of metalinguistic awareness helps children anticipate and detect meaning relationships between words (Bohannon and Others, 1984). Also, developmental patterns in the reading and aural skills improve with age. Children with increasing ability in reading are progressively more successful in their ability to segment words in both aural and visual contexts (Allan, 1982).

First graders are aware of their own "misunderstandings" when they have to reinact a procedure. The reinactment forces retrieval of information and focus of attending. In contrast, third graders are aware of a need to structure

stimuli in order to manipulate and process information by developing mnemonic strategies. Older children seem to see the relationship between organization and memory (Markman, 1977).

Conclusion

It appears that metalinguistic skill development is related to cognitive development and is dependent on metalinguistic awareness which runs parallel to cognitive growth.

Research studies seem to provide findings that show metalinguistic awareness is interrelated to:

...reading ability, which process also develops metalinguistic awareness.

...academic achievement, which is significantly correlated to reading ability and to I.Q.

...and to environmental stimulation and play before school, which enhances I.Q. and linguistic awareness and gives young school-age children an edge in dealing with receptive and expressive language in an academic context (Owens, 1984).

It appears, then, that early metalinguistic awareness is important to literacy in reading and in language arts during the elementary school years. Perhaps this should be considered when determining a child's readiness to learn to read and use language in formal situations. Thus, literacy may be thought of as the essence of metalinguistic awareness which begins when the two-year-old child begins to monitor his own speech (Clark, 1978).

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